DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 260 TM 025 214

AUTHOR Kitao, S. Kathleen; Kitao, Kenji
TITLE Testing Communicative Competence.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Knowledge Level; Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; Receptive Language; *Second Language Learning; *Test Construction

ABSTRACT

Although testing language has traditionally taken the form of testing knowledge about language, the idea of testing communicative competence is becoming recognized as being of great importance in second language learning. Communicative language tests are intended to be a measure of how the testees are able to use language in real life situations. Communicative testing must consider both receptive and productive skills. Such tests are often very context-specific, as is appropriate. The assumption that the test should represent the context in which the student will use the language influences tasks chosen to test communicative competence. Speaking and listening tasks that are commonly used in testing communication skills are those that require completion of an information gap, role play, reading and writing tests, letter writing tests, summarizing tasks, and note taking tests. Communicative language tests must make an effort to test language in a way that reflects its use in real communication. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. KATHLEEN KITAO
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Testing Communicative Competence

S. Kathleen Kitao Doshisha Women's College Kyoto, Japan
Kenji Kitao Doshisha University Kyoto, Japan

ED 398 260

Testing language has traditionally taken the form of testing knowledge about language, usually the testing of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However, there is much more to being able to use language than knowledge about it. Dell Hymes proposed the concept of communicative competence. He argued that a speaker can be able to produce grammatical sentences that are completely inappropriate. In communicative competence, he included not only the ability to form correct sentences but to use them at appropriate times. Since Hymes proposed the idea in the early 1970s, it has been expanded considerably, and various types of competencies have been proposed. However, the basic idea of communicative competence remains the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations.

The Communicative Approach to Testing

What Communicative Language Tests Measure

Communicative language tests are intended to be a measure of how the testees are able to use language in real life situations. In testing productive skills, emphasis is placed on appropriateness rather than on ability to form grammatically correct sentences. In testing receptive skills, emphasis is placed on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than on picking out specific details. And, in fact, the two are often combined in communicative testing, so that the testee must both comprehend and respond in real time. In real life, the different skills are not often used entirely in isolation. Students in a class may listen to a lecture, but they later need to use information from the lecture in a paper. In taking part in a group discussion, they need to use both listening and speaking skills. Even reading a book for pleasure may be followed by recommending it to a friend and telling the friend why you liked it.

The "communicativeness" of a test might be seen as being on a continuum. Few tests are completely communicative; many tests have some element of communicativeness. For example, a test in which testees listen to an utterance on a tape and then choose from among three choices

TM025214

2 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the most appropriate response is more communicative than one in which the testees answer a question about the meaning of the utterance. However, it is less communicative than one in which the testees are face-to-face with the interlocutor (rather than listening to a tape) and are required to produce an appropriate response.

Tasks

Communicative tests are often very context-specific. A test for testees who are going to British universities as students would be very different from one for testees who are going to their company's branch office in the United States. If at all possible, a communicative language test should be based on a description of the language that the testees need to use. Though communicative testing is not limited to English for Specific Purposes situations, the test should reflect the communicative situation in which the testees are likely to find themselves. In cases where the testees do not have a specific purpose, the language that they are tested on can be directed toward general social situations where they might be in a position to use English.

This basic assumption influences the tasks chosen to test language in communicative situations. A communicative test of listening, then, would test not whether the testee could understand what the utterance, "Would you mind putting the groceries away before you leave" means, but place it in a context and see if the testee can respond appropriately to it.

If students are going to be tested over communicative tasks in an achievement test situation, it is necessary that they be prepared for that kind of test, that is, that the course material cover the sorts of tasks they are being asked to perform. For example, you cannot expect testees to correctly perform such functions as requests and apologies appropriately and evaluate them on it if they have been studying from a structural syllabus. Similarly, if they have not been studying writing business letters, you cannot expect them to write a business letter for a test.

Tests intended to test communicative language are judged, then, on the extent to which they simulate real life communicative situations rather than on how reliable the results are. In fact, there is an almost inevitable loss of reliability as a result of the loss of control in a communicative testing situation. If, for example a test is intended to test the ability to participate in a group discussion for students who are going to a British university, it is impossible to control what the other participants in the discussion will say, so not every testee will be observed in the same situation, which

would be ideal for test reliability. However, according to the basic assumptions of communicative language testing, this is compensated for by the realism of the situation.

Evaluation

There is necessarily a subjective element to the evaluation of communicative tests. Real life situations don't always have objectively right or wrong answers, and so band scales need to be developed to evaluate the results. Each band has a description of the quality (and sometimes quantity) of the receptive or productive performance of the testee.

Examples of Communicative Test Tasks

Speaking/Listening

Information gap. An information gap activity is one in which two or more testees work together, though it is possible for a confederate of the examiner rather than a testee to take one of the parts. Each testee is given certain information but also lacks some necessary information. The task requires the testees to ask for and give information. The task should provide a context in which it is logical for the testees to be sharing information.

The following is an example of an information gap activity.

Student A

You are planning to buy a tape recorder. You don't want to spend more than about 80 pounds, but you think that a tape recorder that costs less than 50 pounds is probably not of good quality. You definitely want a tape recorder with auto reverse, and one with a radio built in would be nice. You have investigated three models of tape recorder and your friend has investigated three models. Get the information from him/her and share your information. You should start the conversation and make the final decision, but you must get his/her opinion, too.
(information about three kinds of tape recorders)

Student B

Your friend is planning to buy a tape recorder, and each of you investigated three types of tape recorder. You think it is best to get a small, light tape recorder. Share your information with your friend, and find out about the three tape recorders that your friend

investigated. Let him/her begin the conversation and make the final decision, but don't hesitate to express your opinion.
(information about three kinds of tape recorders)

This kind of task would be evaluated using a system of band scales. The band scales would emphasize the testee's ability to give and receive information, express and elicit opinions, etc. If its intention were communicative, it would probably not emphasize pronunciation, grammatical correctness, etc., except to the extent that these might interfere with communication. The examiner should be an observer and not take part in the activity, since it is difficult to both take part in the activity and evaluate it. Also, the activity should be tape recorded, if possible, so that it could be evaluated later and it does not have to be evaluated in real time.

Role Play. In a role play, the testee is given a situation to play out with another person. The testee is given in advance information about what his/her role is, what specific functions he/she needs to carry out, etc. A role play task would be similar to the above information gap activity, except that it would not involve an information gap. Usually the examiner or a confederate takes one part of the role play.

The following is an example of a role play activity.

Student
You missed class yesterday. Go to the teacher's office and apologize for having missed the class. Ask for the handout from the class. Find out what the homework was.

Examiner
You are a teacher. A student who missed your class yesterday comes to your office. Accept her/his apology, but emphasize the importance of attending classes. You do not have any extra handouts from the class, so suggest that she/he copy one from a friend. Tell her/him what the homework was.

Again, if the intention of this test were to test communicative language, the testee would be assessed on his/her ability to carry out the functions (apologizing, requesting, asking for information, responding to a suggestion, etc.) required by the role.

Testing Reading and Writing

Some tests combine reading and writing in communicative situations. Testees can be given a task in which they are presented with instructions to write a letter, memo, summary, etc., answering certain questions, based on information that they are given.

Letter writing. In many situations, testees might have to write business letters, letters asking for information, etc.

The following is an example of such a task.

Your boss has received a letter from a customer complaining about problems with a coffee maker that he bought six months ago. Your boss has instructed you to check the company policy on returns and repairs and reply to the letter. Read the letter from the customer and the statement of the company policy about returns and repairs below and write a formal business letter to the customer.

(the customer's complaint letter; the company policy)

The letter would be evaluated using a band scale, based on compliance with formal letter writing layout, the content of the letter, inclusion of correct and relevant information, etc.

Summarizing. Testees might be given a long passage--for example, 400 words--and be asked to summarize the main points in less than 100 words. To make this task communicative, the testees should be given realistic reasons for doing such a task. For example, the longer text might be an article that their boss would like to have summarized so that he/she can incorporate the main points into a talk.

The summary would be evaluated, based on the inclusion of the main points of the longer text.

Testing Listening and Writing/Note Taking

Listening and writing may also be tested in combination. In this case, testees are given a listening text and they are instructed to write down certain information from the text. Again, although this is not interactive, it should somehow simulate a situation where information would be written down from a spoken text.

An example of such a test is as follows.

You and two friends would like to see a movie. You call the local multiplex theater. Listen to their recording and fill in the missing information in the chart so that you can discuss it with your friends later.

Theater Number	Movie	Starting Times
1	Air Head	
2		4:00, 6:00, 8:00
3		4:35, 6:45, 8:55
4	Off Track	

Summary

Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects the way that language is used in real communication. It is, of course, not always possible to make language tests communicative, but it may often be possible to give them communicative elements. This can have beneficial backwash effects. If students are encouraged to study for more communicative tasks, this can only have a positive effect on their language learning.